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ABSTRACT

A particularly difficult problem for teacher educators is preparing teachers who both understand and are able to work with students who are educationally disadvantaged, and/or are at-risk academically. Most preservice teachers have little or no contact with these students and therefore never learn how to help them overcome academic deficiencies. Typically, they believe that disadvantaged students are different from conventional students as learners and as people. They believe that the primary task of the teacher is to convey information to students and that they can deal effectively with students while expressing only minimal regard for how these students live outside of the classroom. This paper describes a field experience in which undergraduates (N=9) in a teacher preparation program at an urban university were placed in a middle school and asked to work one-on-one with students who were two or more years behind their peers in reading and/or math. Participants were observed and interviewed; results suggest the preservice teachers found at-risk students to be very much like the more traditional students they had worked with; and they were able to help them acquire some basic academic skills. All interviewees found the experience to be worthwhile and rewarding. (LL)

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Preservice Teachers
And At-Risk Students

by

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Abstract

This article describes a field experience in which undergraduates in a teacher preparation program at an urban, comprehensive university were asked to work with students who might appropriately be described as being at-risk, i.e., they were two or more grade levels behind their peers in reading and math. The preservice teachers found that these at-risk students were very much like the more traditional students they had worked with and that they were able to help them to acquire some basic academic skills. Ultimately, all interviewees found the experience to be worthwhile and rewarding, albeit not without flaws.

Preservice Teachers And At-Risk Students

Those of us working in teacher preparation are constantly challenged to provide experiences that will help students fully understand the demands of being a teacher, the nature of the students they will be teaching, and ways to deal with at least some of the problems they will likely encounter in the classroom. We design our courses and provide in-school observations and participation with the ultimate goal of creating better teachers.

Yet, providing courses and in-school experiences for preservice teachers is not necessarily enough to assure that they learn how to deal with everything they will encounter as they begin teaching. One particularly difficult problem for teacher educators is preparing teachers who both understand and are able to work with students who are educationally disadvantaged, and/or are at-risk academically. What appears to happen, at least for most of the pre-service teachers at my institution, is that teachers-in-preparation have little or no contact with these students and therefore never learn how to help them overcome academic deficiencies.

I see at least three assumptions made by the preservice teachers I work with that seem relevant for providing meaningful school experiences for teachers-to-be. First, many individuals who elect to enter the teacher preparation program at my institution express a belief that disadvantaged students are different from conventional students as learners, and more importantly, as people. Second, they come to the teacher role believing that the primary task of the teacher is to convey information to students. Third, some of these teachers-to-be assume that they can effectively deal with students while expressing only minimal regard for how these students live outside of the classroom. Reflective of what Seymour Sarason (1982) has described

as "The encapsulated school system," the preservice teachers behave as though they can work with the students they see in school without considering how their families, communities, or economic and ethnic backgrounds affect their lives. These three assumptions provide a partial understanding of how a typical preservice teacher at my institution conceives of his/her role in relation to at-risk students.

One way for preservice teachers to meaningfully learn both about the multifaceted role of being a teacher and the academically at-risk student is through working directly with these students. By working closely with disadvantaged students a new teacher will bring to his/her classes a better understanding of the students who will most often have the greatest difficulties functioning in the classroom and will very likely provide the new teacher with his/her greatest challenges. In the end, preservice teachers must enter the profession reasonably prepared to assist all of the students in their care to develop and grow as human beings. I would think that helping a teacher-to-be develop an appreciation for, and empathy with, those students who have school experiences that are very different from their own would be exceedingly useful.

In this paper I will present some findings from a qualitative study in which preservice teachers, undergraduates in a teacher education program at an urban, comprehensive university, were placed in a middle school (herein referred to as "A-School") with students who were two or more years behind their age-mates in reading and/or math. For most of the preservice teachers this was the first experience they had working with students of this type. For all, it was the first time they had been placed in a classroom devoted exclusively to working with such students and it was the first time they had been in the role of providing extensive academic remediation by working closely with such students.

The original design for this study was to include three parts. My overall intention was to provide a well-rounded examination of a unique field experience as it actually happened. Unfortunately, due to the financial and time restrictions that were fundamental to this project, I chose to focus on only the first portion of what I had initially hoped to do. I built this study around the experiences of the preservice teachers, which had from the beginning been the primary motivation for doing the study. Perhaps, at some other time, I may begin anew to pursue an examination of the benefits to the students and the connection between the university and the school as a by-product of this type of field experience (in that this study was truly qualitative, i.e. the experience was unique, replication may be extremely difficult; see method). Because the emphasis was on providing meaningful field experiences for preservice teachers I felt that limiting this study to the examination of their experiences was reasonable.

The central objective of this project was to give potential teachers an opportunity to work with students who might best be described as academically disadvantaged, that is, those students who do not effectively deal with classroom responsibilities. Such writers as Cusick (1973), Everhart (1983), and Larkin (1979) have described how even mainstream junior high and high school students lack commitment to their class work. For some students, such as the ones described in this study, this lack of commitment is augmented by an incapacity to function effectively as learners. Academically disadvantaged students may also suffer as a result of teacher expectations (see: Brophy & Good 1974). For a variety of reasons these students have not been successful in school and typically require special attention in order to learn the basic curriculum. My colleague, who initiated this field experience, had hopes that preservice teachers, by working one-on-one with at-risk students, would learn to better understand the

difficulties involved in helping these students and, at the same time, help them acquire some basic academic skills.

While the results presented herein are strictly exploratory I believe there are indications that having preservice teachers work with at-risk students may prove a worthwhile component of teacher-preparation. This group of preservice teachers seems to have benefited from making contact with students who are not usually successful in the classroom and who require special attention if they are to learn at all. The long term results of this experience are difficult to gauge but the potential for these preservice teachers developing into more responsive and sensitive teachers as a by-product of what they went through at A-School does exist.

Method

The method used in conducting this study was qualitative. Agreeing with Eisner's (1991) guidelines I set out to do a study that primarily: 1) was field focused, 2) uses the self as an instrument, 3) involves interpretive character, 4) uses expressive language, 5) attends to particulars, and 6) has coherence, insight, and instrumental utility (see Eisner 1991 for a more thorough discussion of these topics). My intention was to better understand how one might create for potential teachers an experience whereby they would learn to work closely with students who are considerably lacking in their basic skills. I chose a qualitative approach because it best enabled me to consider the unique characteristics of this one setting, group of students, and set of circumstances.

My sources were the following: 1) my own observations and those of a colleague (the person who initiated this field experience), 2) my talks with the students, 3) comments and input from

the teacher of the class, 4) interviews with the preservice teachers from the local comprehensive university. Categories one and four have provided the primary data for this study, and I have herein chosen to focus on the preservice teachers and their descriptions of what they have learned through this experience.

The observations were informal in the sense that I did not go into the class looking for specific activities or events. Instead, I watched what was going on in the room and tried to make sense of what I was seeing, based on the teacher's stated intention of providing these students with basic skills and the activities in which I saw the students engaged. Essentially, I used what Agar (1980) refers to as "Direct Observation." I did not, however, allow myself the luxury of relying only on what I could see. I also asked the teacher, students, and preservice teachers to give me their impressions and understandings of what I was seeing in that room during the time I was present. In this way, I was able to verify, or at least clarify, what I thought I had seen and make greater sense of my experiences of the class.

The interviews were a little more structured in that certain questions seemed relevant as a starting point. However, I also encouraged the interviewees to reframe and embellish the questions as they saw fit. Michael Agar (1980) explains the difference between formal and informal interviews as follows:

The general idea distinguishing formal from informal interviews is, again, the idea of control. In the informal, everything is negotiable. The informants can criticize a question, correct it, point out that it is sensitive, or answer in any way they want to (pg 90).

My intention was to capture the interviewees best understanding of the experience without

shaping it too much to my own expectations. As a result I tended to keep the interviews informal. That said, I did begin with five questions that I believed the preservice teachers might find relevant. The questions were as follows, each question being a simple expression of what I hoped to learn:

- A. How did you perceive your role at the school?
- B. What relationship did you have with the students?
- C. How would you describe the students you were working with at the middle school?
- D. What do you believe your contribution to be, to the education of the students at the middle school?
- E. What have you learned as a unique result of your experiences at the middle school?

I assumed these questions would provide a starting point for getting the preservice teachers to talk about their experiences in the school. The specific questions were far less important than the topics being addressed. In other words, I was really most concerned with getting the preservice teachers to talk about each of these five areas of potential interest. There was one additional question in which I allowed the interviewees to tell about anything I had not already considered or anything that we had not talked about already in the interview that they thought might be important for understanding their experiences in the school. This question provided an open-ended opportunity to comment on anything and everything in their own way using as little or as much detail as they wished.

Having made several visits to the school I was often able to refer to specific instances and

students as a way of eliciting responses. In this way, the preservice teachers understood that I had met and interacted with the students and could talk very precisely about the things they had done while in the school.

Nine preservice teachers were interviewed for this study. In keeping with guidelines suggested by Goetz and LeCompte (1984) they were chosen based on the number of hours they had spent at the school. A few potential interviewees had made only one or two trips to the school and were therefore not considered for interviews in the belief that they had not had sufficient contact with the students to be able to understand their needs and problems or, more importantly, to have gotten anything significant from the experience. One person, who did have a sufficient number of hours in the school, was eliminated because I was unable to set up an agreeable time and place to meet. This individual lived in a town approximately an hour away and was reluctant to make a special trip to meet with me for an interview. At the same time my obligations precluded my meeting with him in his town. I have no reason to believe this person's experience would have been any different than the others. However, I have no way of knowing what kind of responses he would have given.

All but one of the interviews took place in my office at the university. This arrangement was convenient both for the interviewer and interviewees. The one exception involved a woman with small children who asked if I might come to her home to save her the inconvenience and expense of finding a caretaker for her children. In that going to her would assure the thoroughness of the interviews, I happily agreed to do so.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. While the accuracy is excellent in almost all cases there were one or two instances where the interviewee spoke too softly or indistinctly

to be interpreted at the time the tapes were transcribed. In these exceptions I have had to leave out a segment or make a reasonable interpretation of what was being said. At no time did a failure of this nature affect my capacity to understand the overall drift of what was being said.

Results

The nine preservice teachers I interviewed for this study all had very positive things to say about their experiences working with this particular group of educationally disadvantaged students at A-School. As a by-product of this experience, they saw new and exciting possibilities for themselves as teachers and expressed a greater interest in working with students who were not very successful in school and for whom going to school was not terribly pleasant. Even though some of the preservice teachers indicated they would still prefer work with the more mainstream students they left believing that they were now able to be more responsive to disadvantaged students as a by-product of having worked closely with them at A-School. This seems a significant development by itself. By producing teachers who have some understanding and some willingness to work with students who have substantial problems in school, teacher-educators may create a work force better able to successfully deal with the realities of teaching at-risk and disadvantaged students.

Briefly stated, the following are my findings derived from observations of and interviews with the teachers-in-training who were placed at A-School. I have attempted to obtain their understandings of their own experiences with these disadvantaged students. They communicated to me: That educationally disadvantaged students are not really different from mainstream students. That teachers need to understand the kinds of students they will be working with.

That educationally disadvantaged students typically do not have a great deal of support for education at home. These preservice teachers also revealed that they went into the field experience with limited knowledge of what teaching is all about in general. They felt they had learned first-hand what the students they worked with at A-School were capable of doing academically. They also expressed that they could enjoy working with these students who were academically behind their agemates. Finally, the preservice teachers indicated a desire for more opportunities to do work with an entire class and for more specific instructions as to what they should have been doing at A-School.

One of the findings from this project is that this group of teachers-in-preparation found the educationally disadvantaged students they worked with herein to be not substantially different from the mainstream students they had worked with in other settings, at least in terms of non-academic issues. That is to say, the K-students had interests and desires and were able to do most of the work once they were shown how it was done. In fact, the major difficulties the preservice teachers saw within this group of students were a lack of attention and a lack of motivation. They felt that they had to constantly monitor the activities of the students if the students were to get anything accomplished. They could understand how this would be a considerable drain emotionally, physically, and intellectually on the teacher who has thirty, or more, students in a class. This gave the preservice teachers some appreciation for the demands of teaching and helped them to understand how a teacher might essentially give up on certain students feeling that they required too much assistance to ever accomplish anything remotely close to what the rest of the class was going, in spite of their obvious need for help. Recognizing how a teacher might give up on disadvantaged students also helped the nine

interviewees better appreciate how these students could become discipline problems as a result of being frustrated academically.

Because there were several preservice teachers who participated in this field experience one-on-one or one-on-two attention for the at-risk students was typically available. The observation of all interviewees was that when the students in the class had an adult who was willing to work closely with them they would do the work, but, if they were not receiving some special attention, they would talk or play or simply sit and state. No interviewee perceived school as being a topic these students felt very strongly supportive of. They were willing to tolerate school and would learn, but only when they were provided with some kind of real contact where they felt free to show what they could do, and could not do, without fear of retribution, from the adults or the other students. The nine preservice teachers found this situation disturbing. They were not unwilling to provide the one-on-one attention but recognized that in a conventional classroom this would not be a realistic means of helping disadvantaged or at-risk students. This caused the preservice-teachers to understand how once a child falls behind he/she will very likely continue to stay behind unless someone makes a point of providing special help. Also, they could see that for most of these students there were not many individuals available who were willing to provide that extra help.

The teacher-preparation students from the university found the one-on-one arrangement for working with the middle school students generally satisfying. They enjoyed the close contact with the students and found that they could actually teach them some things that were helpful. Realizing that they were having an impact made them feel more competent and self-assured that they were making the correct choice by going into teaching. Furthermore, the fact that they

were teaching these students was a very positive experience and made them feel good about themselves as potential teachers.

More specifically, being with this group of disadvantaged students lead the teacher-preparation students to clarify their own interests as they engaged in the process of becoming teachers. For some, this clarification meant they were more interested in working with students who are not successful in school. For others, it meant knowing that work with at-risk students would not be a very desirable arrangement for them and they would rather pursue a more mainstream assignment in which they could work with more conventional students. In some instances the preservice-teachers were forced to examine their own interests and beliefs so far as planning to become teachers at all. Dealing with this group of students forced them to reexamine their own lives and their own experiences in school. Through this self-analysis the preservice teachers got a better perspective on the kinds of students they themselves had been and how they had not only managed to survive within the school system but had actually succeeded and gone on to higher education as well.

The nine interviewees also came to understand that for most of these students there would be little help at home. Even where the parents were interested in education they were emotionally, intellectually, or physically unable to provide the help their children needed. As such, the parents relied on the guidance of the school, in spite of the obvious fact that the school was able to give their children considerably less than what was needed. For most of the preservice teachers this fact was quite disturbing and often somewhat depressing. They wanted to be able to do something for these students but saw how that was not likely to happen given the restrictions of the typical classroom and school. Some accepted that this was simply a

limitation of teaching, in general, and others felt some motivation to seek out special help for these students.

An unexpected, and undesired, aspect of conducting this study was to find that the preservice teachers went into the field with so little knowledge of what teaching is all about. For most, becoming a teacher is some vague desired end-goal, an objective to be reached, as opposed to being some work they can understand and prepare to do. There was, for a few of the individuals interviewed, a perception that some people are able to teach and others are not, as though teaching is an unalterable trait like height or eye color. This was not always the case but it happened frequently enough to make this researcher a little uneasy. This belief was all the more frightening because it was accompanied by the fact that, for most of these individuals, student teaching was only a semester away. By this stage of their preparation I would have liked to have seen a more sophisticated understanding of the work of teaching and a greater recognition of the fact that there are obtainable skills that a teacher-to-be can learn.

Working with disadvantaged students at A-School was perhaps most beneficial in that these nine preservice teachers were forced to accept that there are students who do not do well in school and require more attention than what most classroom teachers are willing and/or able to provide. Coming face to face with students who did not understand after hearing a carefully thought out explanation by the teacher created for these teachers-in-preparation an awareness that something more than explanation must happen for certain students to be able to learn. This realization seemed to force the preservice teachers to conceive of more creative approaches to thinking about how to convey information to students. They expressed a belief that they had benefitted from this experience by becoming more resourceful as teachers, no longer assuming

that teacher exposition about a topic is enough to promote student learning.

One of the most attractive findings of this study was that the preservice teachers came to more adequately understand what these students are realistically capable of doing and found means whereby they could help them to improve their basic skills. By meeting with the students one-on-one, and in small groups, the preservice teachers were able to establish meaningful contact with these students, without perceiving them as students who just don't "get it." They expressed a greater sensitivity in their professional approaches to the students. They were able to deal with these students as individuals, deserving of respect and consideration, rather than as problems that as teachers they must somehow make peace with.

In general, the preservice teachers came to enjoy these students as individuals. They were able to listen to them talk about their lives, their beliefs, their dreams, and their frustrations and came to care about them in ways that they seemed not to have anticipated. Because they came to understand these students as not being substantially different from the "normal" students they had dealt with in other experiences they became more sympathetic and supportive of them. Working closely allowed the preservice teachers to see that these students had certain learning problems but that did not necessarily mean that they had to also be discipline problems or undesireables. In this way the students became known as individuals who required guidance and assistance and looked to the preservice teachers for nurturance and support.

The preservice teachers did not wholly and unequivacally praise their experience working with the students in K-class. They felt that certain things could have been done to make the experience better for them. For one thing they would have liked to have had more opportunities to present to the group as a whole. This criticism seems a bit unfair when, according to their

own responses in the interviews, the real strength of the experience was being able to work one-on-one with the students. Doing more work with the group would have taken away from the time they had to do the one-on-one sessions. The rationale behind wanting more time to work with the group apparently stemmed from their desire to become better prepared for student teaching. While this does seem a worthwhile goal, it also seems unreasonable to automatically assume that sacrificing the one-on-one contact of this experience to become better prepared for student teaching is automatically advantageous.

A more relevant, and perhaps more significant, criticism, or more accurately a complaint, was that the preservice teachers felt they had gone into the school with little or no idea of what they were supposed to be doing there. They would have liked to have had a bit more structure and direction for the experience. This would seem a valuable criticism for all field experiences were, too often, the preservice teachers are simply told to be in the school and observe and help out wherever they can. What they received before going into A-school was simply not enough direction. These university students were not asking for a day-by-day, blow-by-blow account of what their obligations would be but were merely asserting that they would have liked to have a bit more help in understanding the general nature of what their role in the school was to be. In the beginning they came to the school to watch and soon found ways that they were able to actually help out. Interestingly, some of the preservice teachers never moved much beyond observing and answering questions while others took the initiative to plan and present lessons. There were no restrictions on what the preservice teachers could do in this experience, but, they were not given indications of what might be allowed and, unless they took the initiative to talk to the teacher about things they wanted to do, he did not come to them and ask for their input.

No doubt, this situation was complicated by the fact that it was the first time such an experience was attempted.

In some ways this was a double edged sword in that the loosely organized structure of the experience helped to make it positive and yet it was something that, as a group, they seemed to feel was detrimental to their professional development as teachers. Those individuals who did take the initiative and attempted to do something with the time they were in the school expressed fewer criticisms of the experience so far as the lack of structure was concerned. The individuals who felt the greatest need to have more structure were those individuals who had been unwilling, or perhaps unable, to provide any direction for themselves. This experience may have forced them to acknowledge their own lack of initiative and they found they did not particularly want to deal with the issue. It was easier to blame the individuals who placed them in the setting and the teacher they were working with than to own up to the fact that they had not done anything to try to take charge of the experience and make a contribution.

In general, the preservice teachers learned that these disadvantaged students were very much like their more academically successful peers. They also learned that they could do things, as teachers, to help these students and that working with them and getting to know them was largely a pleasant experience. Finally, they learned that they wanted to have some structure in their field experiences and did not necessarily want to assume full responsibility for deciding how they might best make a contribution.

Discussion

In examining my observations and interviews I believe that this experience was largely

positive for the preservice teachers who elected to be a part of the A-School class. They were able to interact with the students, come to some reasonable understanding of what these students could and could not do and developed good feelings about them as human beings. This was a very valuable experience for this group of preservice teachers and they appreciated it because it gave them both a better look at disadvantaged students and at themselves as potential teachers. By having the chance to work very closely with a group of students who had many problems and few advantages they were able to come to a new appreciation of teaching as a profession that involves helping people as opposed to simply disseminating information. They were also able to see how helping young people to learn can be both exciting and rewarding.

For this researcher, recognizing the human aspects of teaching would seem a worthwhile goal for any teacher preparation program. Too often teacher preparation is concerned with the roles of cognitive achievement and classroom discipline and ignores the most important reason for having teachers at all, which is to help those individuals we call students. Creating experiences that help preservice teachers get in touch with their students as human beings seems an important contribution in preparing professional educators.

To recreate this experience for large numbers of preservice teachers might prove overwhelmingly difficult. Finding field experiences for preservice teachers is always difficult, to find ones where they would work exclusively, or even primarily, with at-risk children may prove impossible, it might even prove undesirable. However, based on this one experience I would contend that, whenever possible, preservice teachers can benefit from having the opportunity to work closely with students who are in some way academically disadvantaged. These students are perhaps the greatest challenge a teacher, especially a new teacher, will have

to face. Any person capable of successfully helping these students will find that they have the potential to reach a largely overlooked faction of the school population.

At the same time, one of the outstanding benefits these preservice teachers derived from this experience was that these students were "just kids." This revelation, while hardly profound, is important in that they may now accept the possibility of treating these students the same way as they would other, more "normal," students and have greater success working with them. Their expectations for these students may become more appropriate and supportive.

Whether or not more structure is necessary and desirable as a part of this experience is questionable in this researcher's mind. I believe that a part of what made this experience positive was the fact that there were no strict guidelines for what the preservice teachers were supposed to do when they were with the students. As such, this removed them from the role of being actual teachers so that they might truly get to know the students and interact with them without being concerned about how it would affect their authority in the classroom. More structure would have the benefit of removing some of the anxiety that the preservice teachers felt when they went into the school and it might also guarantee that they do more with the students as a group. However, as it happens with most field experiences, this one ultimately had the potential to be whatever the individuals involved wanted it to be. They could do as little or as much as they wanted while they were present in A-School and their own ambitions and desires were all they needed to make a mark.

Perhaps one of the lessons for some of these individuals was that teaching is not a career for everyone. That for some individuals there are, no doubt, better ways to spend your time and earn a living. For others, this experience seemed to reaffirm that teaching was in fact a

career of choice and they found that fact to be reassuring. For these individuals this was one very significant opportunity to practice their skills and work with students and was not simply another notch on their way to becoming credentialed. I would conclude that for the nine interviewees this was a very worthwhile part of their teacher-preparation program.

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